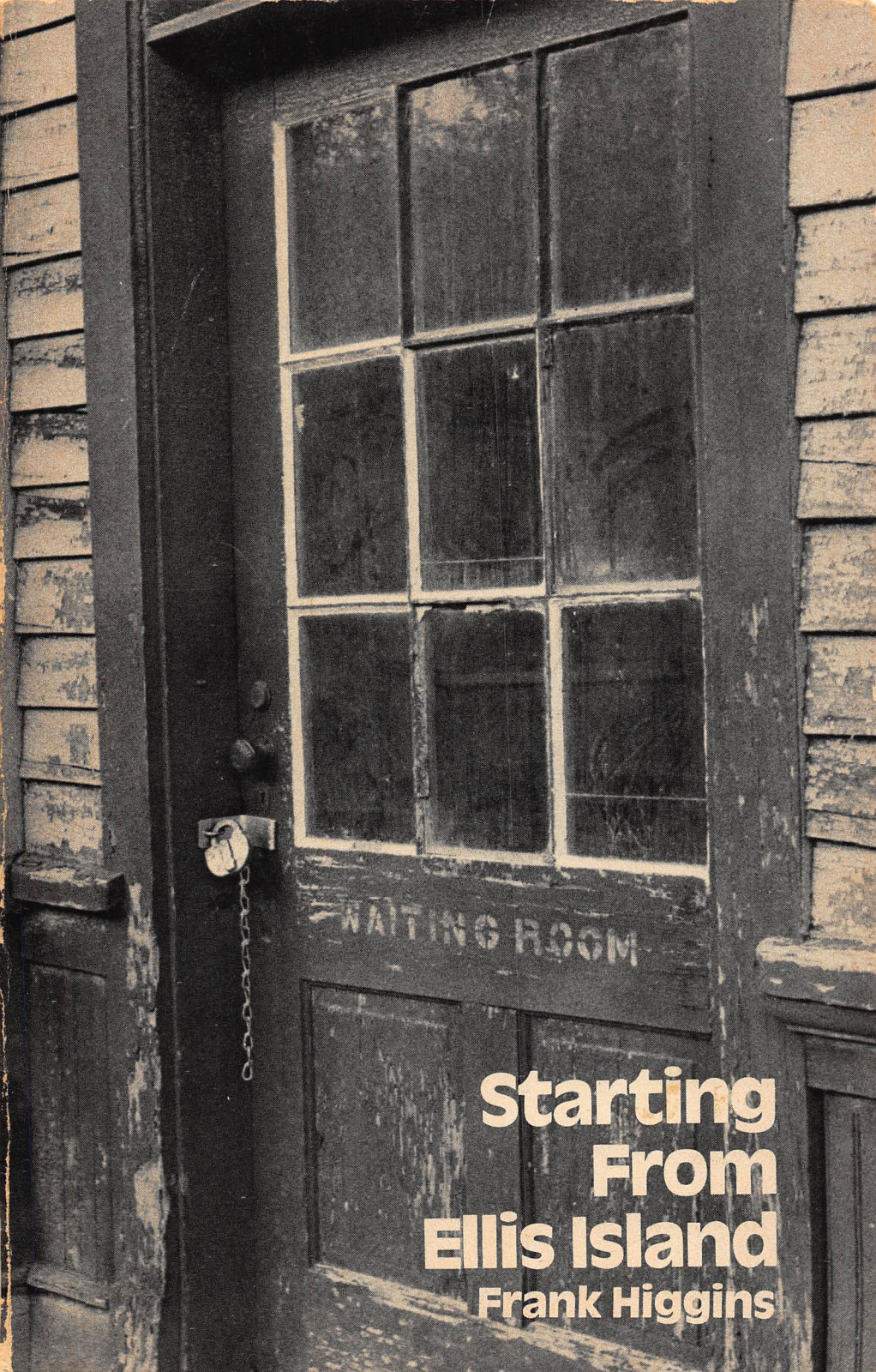

Starting From Ellis Island

Frank Higgins

FRANK HIGGINS has worked as a Poet-in-the-Schools for the Missouri Arts Council and Kansas Arts Commission. His play *There Came Forth From Darkness* has been performed in Kansas City. Higgins published a previous book of poems (BkMk) titled *hello hello*. A forthcoming book of haiku will appear later this year, *Headed Where Used Up Electricity Goes.*

BkMk

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for my father

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Starting From Ellis Island

My family immigrated to New York
so we could make our choice in life.
Starting from Ellis Island
our name was two syllables shorter;
we learned the word 'shortchanged.'

My mother did part-time work
putting cotton balls in pill bottles;
my father drove an ice truck, smoked cigars
that smelled like old tires burning.
I walked a girl home who wasn't Catholic:
he said I was no better than him, or God,
if I wanted to carry on the business
and drive his ice truck when his days were through,
I'd better let her go . . .
so I signed up with Uncle Sam,
went to fight in the mountains
not far from where my father was born,
not far from where he feared life on the farm.

Our priest sent me a note hinting
how at my father's deathbed my mother sat
worried how the kids ate at the neighbors,
worried why I sent no letters.
I'd crossed enough burned down farms
it showed in my footsteps.

Coming back, I looked in the hatch
at coffins stacked like blocks of ice;
I thought of my father.
If he'd lived, refrigerators
would have put him out of business.

I climbed the Statue of Liberty to kill time,
looked out at Ellis and thought of my father's farm.
All he could be sure of coming here was a country
he couldn't understand.
From this day on I'll be my father's son.

On Looking Into My Father's Coffin

Get up damn you
and reproach me for talking like this

The Eyes of Jesus,
The Eyes of Abraham Lincoln

For centuries painters have taken on the eyes of Jesus,
eyes that took on our sins
as if we all were Dorian Gray:
We do not see President Lincoln's eyes as art.
We know Lincoln dreamed his own death
and knew how it would happen.
But perhaps he saw more in that vision
than what he told us:
take all art of the Crucifixion,
transpose the eyes, the faces, the figures.
Instead of the unremarkable body of Jesus,
imagine a long thin naked nailed-down Lincoln
staring from the Cross.
Imagine Jesus with bad generals,
a dead son, a wife gone odd;
imagine Jesus carried from the Ford Theater
and a people knowing they must live up to him
because he can't come back.

Family Sundays

Evening kitchen
just listening to the rice
busy in the pot.
My job: push back my sleeves
and when needed add a pinch
of oregano from the tin.

Grandma shoos scavengers
out of the salad bowl
and back to the living room
where Grandpa's showing off
letting his teeth drop
to bite his chin
while adults talk of N.R.A. and Jack,
Aunt Cleta's first husband,
buried now in Phoenix
or Tucson
some western place,
they aren't sure.

An old lady no taller than a broom
enters and sits beside me.
No my collar is never buttoned right
and yes the rice
must surely be done by now.

I scrape it into a bowl
and reach for the sugar
"Tell me more Mom, about 1932."

Charley

On my fifth birthday, Uncle
Charley pushed back from the table,
forgetting even the cake
lost forever in his beard,
told Pa he refused to stutter love
and twiddle yellow thumbs in a blur of world,
or move to where old men beat canes
over hoods of cars parked an inch
over the white dividing lines.

When Charley died
Pa told Ma he went easy.

Merchant Marine

Naked except for his diapers,
walking spreadlegged on the back patio –
he was at it again.
This time though, he shook it out himself,
and a cricket was the bull's eye of poop.

I turned my back for no more
than two minutes – and presto
he was bringing big boobed girls
home to dinner.

Tonight he's crossing the Dateline
headed toward Melborne on the southern run;
and Frank Higgins Jr dogs 12 hour shifts,
sports a ragged beard, and cuts loud farts
at every supper to gag the other mates in laughs.
And after lights out, I suppose he strolls
out on deck, draws on a pipe in darkness, and thinks up
snappy comebacks to the port voices that say,
with their legs wrapped around him,
sailor you're doing fine.

Down to Sea in Sweaters

Sometimes the fog moves in
like a cigar-smoking uncle
who says he'll visit for a week.
When the men in white wool sweaters
slide the old boats to water,
their torsos fade to invisible from upshore –
pants, caps and nothing in between.
Hands thick with used vaseline –
the sweaters become dirty
before the men have gotten their feet wet.
Lifting boats by hand, by grunt,
sinks their footprints so deep
the waves cannot wear them away;
they ooze from underneath, collapsing
as if herds of ants trapped
in giant ant-lion holes were stampeding.
In minutes, like the slow boats
fighting in-coming waves over-outgoing tides,
they're long gone like horns in fog.

When the morning's clear, sun poking out
like a sand crab from under rocks,
a fisherman, sogged by his sweater
till the wet wool sags,
holds his old hands out to warm
as boys do to fathers to count
"seven, eight nine ten,
now am I a man?"

Sometimes a pitch, a yaw,
an unexpected wave
sends him toward the sun for a few feet –
out of the boat wild with rocking –
with one hand the salts row the old oars to the spot,
scratch their chests the way land people
scratch their heads,
stare at their sleeves till they find a snag to fool with.
Onshore, the priest on the bell rope, pulling;
he knows by now boats far out so close
foul their nets if still fishing.

Sometimes days or weeks later,
the sweater and body wash up in a village downshore.
The sweater's pattern says where from,
serves as return address.
Fishing men put their right hand
on the casket when they pass;
they stand in circles in their best,
talk of the nets and tomorrow's weather,
of the catch and patent leather,
of wives, sons, daughters.

Tides

Backyard mothers over the clothesline
have their own words for the time of year
when, with each sailing,
some boy breaks and joins on
for tuna with the Little Italy,
bonita with the Blue Fin.

When the fleet puts out
there's a fellow on his first
refolding rope, tugging on rigging,
too busy to wave
to his family on the pier.
Away from any lamps:
dark as the inside of a whale.
Hands flap themselves out like fish thrown on the dock,
priest puts out the word for a good trip.

A younger brother, made to come say so long,
so caught up in the casting off,
will undo and throw
back the tagline; he
can stare so long
without blinking,
not stamp his lumps of feet,
not eye the old crosslooking mast;
walking the same street where old pros
drove hearse landaus down macadam roads to home,
he can ask his mother afterwards
what cold? what prayers?

When the Retarded Bowl

the manager shuts off the buzzer light.
Balloon heads we call them,
heads like a tire with a bubble;
chewing gum's a job,
one eye rolling maverick in the socket.
The attendents hold court
in the middle of sblobs of slaver,
like the only sober people at a party.
Everyone sits with a ball in his lap
until the turn to throw.
When the retarded bowl
they look out from their balloons stiff lipped
as if even handed a two headed nickel
they could still toss tails.
Some lope down the lane after the ball
if they've thrown a gutter.
Most throw two handed;
one man unloads from waisthigh.
A few laugh when they hit any pins.
An outcry from lane 8 where a boy
has knocked over his first pins of the game
in the fourth frame.
No one goes to the bathroom alone.

TIMEX

On the Road to Grand Canyon

All the Indians tooling around Kayenta
drive Ford or Chevy pickups,
and those not old enough
or rich enough
sit under the awning here at Kayenta Market and Gas
and think about
driving Ford or Chevy pickups.

Among racks of nudie magazines and junk food,
junk food baked and packaged as Comanchee Crunchies
with blood thirsty chiefs wild
on backs of cereal boxes,
pale newspaper clippings glued to the wall
picture the Great Kayenta Crime Caper:
six young bucks shot the grocery up,
locked themselves in and cried for days
we're rich, help us, oh God, we're rich.

Here in the middle of Navajo Land
it would be easy for us to say
we've broken up their paradise,
so we say it and sigh, or buy a nice necklace.
After awhile, the different kinds of cactus
get more attention than the brown faces
selling beads by the side of the road.

Most agree the canyon's worth a long look;
talk in the restaurants on the rim
about how gas costs more here in Arizona,
and the price of film's no laughing matter.
Someone tells the Watch For Falling Rock joke.
There's a lot more around here to see:
drunk Indians boozing in the Kaibab Lounge,
but Las Vegas is still a six hour drive.

Andersonville Souvenir Thumb Screws

We could sell these folks Brooklyn,
or a piece of the true Cross if we lived
where blood clogged the chariot wheels,
where bishops' books resolved the world;
but people who 'buy' Brooklyn invest,
aren't drawn to Dachau in droves
or Andersonville by the carload
to wander around the grounds.

We sell souvenir grey caps, souvenir blue;
mostly, we sell souvenir thumb screws to people
who take pictures of themselves locked in cells,
who shake their heads at shackles in the wall,
who look as long at the hot box or latrine
as crowds in the Capitol watch the Constitution.

Even now, North in Gettysburg,
they board tour buses that bray Pickett's charge,
the same old screams wars have always known,
clamber over rocks on Little Round Top;
and off among the apple trees
they look for slugs in tree trunks;
photograph old barns with shrapnel scars,
Lincoln's pledge on a brass plaque.

Time in Leavenworth, Kansas

Only a mile from the Missouri River, where I have been thinking of Lewis & Clark and Huck Finn, I drive by Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. The dome of the prison shines like the state capitol. If Lewis & Clark or Coronado were to have stumbled upon it they might have thought this the city of gold, the guards and walls and barbed wire were to keep people out. A small bison ranch nearby has twenty or thirty head herded together, with a couple of old buffalo doing solitary near the highway or back by the prison's high fence. You can get a lot of good pictures all in one afternoon. If you work at it you can get a shot of a bison head with the dome of the prison in the background. You can talk about past and present America. You can say how they used to roam this area by the millions. You can say the dome of the prison can be mistaken for a state capitol, or a rooftop from heaven. If the picture turns out, you can cop a prize.

Things To Do And See

All my friends have been to Europe,
I'm driving through Kansas headed home
up 59 highway.
If this were France they would say
this flat land and occasional hill
was moving:
these miles of scrub trees are something
Cezanne would have liked to fool around with.

When they come back from Alsace Loraine
I can tell them of going through Moran,
of the sun-bleached sign over the road:
HOME OF DEBBIE BARNES MISS AMERICA 1968.
I can tell them of the basketball player
for Ottawa College a few years ago
who drove up to Kansas University in Lawrence
and raped twenty girls in the spring.
He must have driven this road, this lane.

I drive and wonder if he got the urge
after practice and took off, back for bedcheck;
if his imagination did anything with the scrub trees.
I drive all the way to Lawrence
wondering how fast he drove
coming here, how fast going.

Notes for Two Failed Paintings

1.

Out here the wind sneaks up on you,
shoves you around;
before you can complain
it's halfway to Dodge,
stopping for a moment in a bra
to wave goodbye from the clothesline.

2.

Word has gotten around about old Ida Marks.
Folks point out she never has crows in her cornfield;
the mechanic in town asked her how come:
a year later metal shavings flew up,
made a fire in his eye
till the iris clouded over.
Now he sees the world through the mist
on his right eye
like Ida sees through her left.
Lucky for her this is Kansas,
not Salem, Mass.

Renting the Stud Horse

Hired hands and girls in western blouses
sit along the top rail like at rodeos,
talk about a movieshow and TV
while the stud backs down the ramp
and someone opens up the gate.
3 more field hands, kept away by far off baling,
come grinding up piled in one tractor, calling
"Wait for us! Hold the show!"
and the stud, so bottom heavy he looks like
he could birth a foal himself, or be full of worms,
nods for the owner to scratch his old mane.
Where are the hoofs that strike sparks from stones?
the eyeballs showing white? red nostrils and foam?
He goes bowlegged slow to the center of the corral,
double decker dragonflies hitching a ride near his tired tail,
while the mare, Kitty, drinks from the trough.
"Come on old Luke, do your stuff" says a shout,
"did you ever see Kitty put on such an act?"
Some of the older men light up, mosey over
to sit on the fenders of station wagons and pickups,
talk about the hardware special in town, the weather,
about the young folks propped along the fencetop or on
cars
who clap or honk their horns calling for encores
from Kitty, who's gotten down to business,
from old Luke, who shows what he's made of.

Historic Marker Ahead

Off the intersection of highways 36
and 281 in northern Kansas:
the geographic center of the United States.
I take the road toward it;
perhaps as I stand on the spot
someone somewhere will ask
"What is at the heart of this country?"
and I will have the wisdom
of knowing it's me;
but a family with Land of Lincoln plates
on their station wagon has it first:
the girls complaining of dust,
the boy not finding enough rocks to throw
and the mother saying
"just think, we're right in the middle,
which way should we go?"

They must have had no problem, the pioneers:
into the wind, into the dust
of what would come to be called Colorado.
This would not be the middle
till they had moved on,
not knowing they were the center
of what was to come;
not knowing of the Rockies to come
or thinking surely
they could not be worse
than the mountains of Missouri,
or the wind come calling
like an avenger, or an old friend.

They are taking too long.
I am pulling away
while the mother takes a picture
and the father checks the oil.

We Turned Right At Success

Until she laid back to doze
we had not spoken for a hundred miles;
if I turned on the radio
there'd be some cowboy knee deep in love.
Headed home along highway 7
we plow through Missouri towns
people in big cities laugh at:
Tightwad, Wet Glaize, Climax Springs.
We turned right at Success:
if she were awake she'd say something.

Well tell me reflection of a star on the windshield –
do star lights star brights still count?
I do 69 through the slouch towns
to amaze the yokels,
but nobody bothers to turn on the lights
and see what's the ruckus

Rain

During a hard rain the old timers
in this town on the Missouri bluff,
the ones who decided to stick around,
recall the flood that moved the town up here
from the waterfront, and argue all afternoon
about what day of the week it was.

But the boys gun their bicycles down the gutter
all the way to the guard rail beside the river
and wish outloud it would rain even more
and flood the town during *their* lifetime.

A one street flood would do,
something to talk about years later
during a hard drought
when the rains have gone forever
and friends have married off
and gone out on their ways
and heroes are hard to find.

After Looking Through the Wards Catalogue

Leslie Hancock (only 8)
crouches in the muskmelon patch,
pushes two melons up under
her grapefruit colored sweater,
pulls it tight, fists on her hips,
then jumps out to grin at passing cars (Yoo Hoo);
if they whistle, honk or slow down:
hands cupped under her melons
she runs to the porch for lemonade,
takes a long drink, holding one melon in place
the other slipping.

When Big Hugh Redman Had His Stroke

a doctor come all the way from Colby
since he knew a thing or two about this stuff
and was able to tell Mrs Redman right off
things were no good
that the feeling would be gone
from Hugh's left side too before long,
that the grin would be worse.

This doc listened to old lady Redman
longer than Big Hugh ever could,
about how Doc Keller had said nothing of the sort,
and who was he anyhow, just a falooter from Colby.
He left behind some odd looking pills
and walked back toward the road,
all the way out kicking up old cottonwood leaves.

Labor Day in Lincoln, Kansas

Two old men with shaking spells
argue over old strikes of railroads,
and poke fun at the fat pink woman
with the little white doggie-woggies,
then shrug at her flag before they hunker down
and over a game of chess
talk it all over, and how
with times like these, who *wouldn't* want to look
and see, somewhere in the distance,
El Dorado, Oz, California?
They talk it over why *they* never went looking,
while the fat pink woman with her hair in pink curlers
sits on her porch
and follows black Baptist preachers on the radio.

Their houses are the white of eggshells,
the white of black men's teeth.

Tire Section of the State Street Junkyard

They got tires, tires to burn
and more tires,
tires piled up like columns of southern mansions;
acres of Super Grippers, Tiger Paws and Road Huggers,
Steel Belted Radials,
the XL 300, the all new XX 5000,
from Goodrich, Goodyear, Firestone,
Armstrong, Michelin and Uniroyal
and stacks of tons of tires
from Monkey Wards and Sears;

tires with worn out tread
till a hole started, like a cavity,
and around it circle grooves like the water marks
found on ceilings of cheap motels,
and one tire worn down so well on one side
threads hang out
while the other side has good tread left,
both together on one tire
like mountains facing the music of the ocean,
or the names of the suburbs:
Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Soledad, Cardiff-by-the-Sea
sitting down next to State Street
and the driver, dismayed to let the two come together
on his tire must have surely said shit.

Tractor tires, pickup and semi truck tires,
tires for forklifts and buses,
jet planes and station wagons and road graders,

racing tires and tires for compacts,
tires for motorcycles and golf carts,
still-white whitewalls from shiny red convertibles,
tires once fit for chrome mags.

Some will make it to the sides of tugs and barges,
some cut in half to fit the front bumper of tow trucks,
some tied to trees for swings in the suburbs,
and some just stay here
on State Street.

When Our Neighbor's House Burned

While people all over the neighborhood
came down to see or wave in the TV cameras,
I watched the strobe light
still flashing on top the fire trucks.
When the last stray cinder was watered,
even as the men folded up hoses,
strapped in axes and took off their hats,
the red light kept going,
as if we might forget:
like old Mrs Tocco
who only told us things we already knew:
"Mrs Higgins Mrs Higgins
my house burned down!"

Fingerpie Lounge

After Monique with battered down boobs
squats on bananas, strokes bored snakes,
after she picks up the quarters,
a thin white girl lopes onto the little stage,
sits naked in a chair, plays the violin,
not missing many notes –
sometimes so few
she makes sailors on liberty quiet
when playing requests
for "My Old Kentucky Home" or "Galveston"
while the lights reflected off her breasts
blink red and white and blue

outside, where pigeons poke after crumbs
and are fooled by cigarette butts,
a large enough crowd gathers gawking
the old streetsinger with torn guitar comes over,
sings he has not yet been paid today –
after the jerking pigeon stops
and the crowd goes away or inside,
the streetsinger sings to pigeons that don't listen:
"I love the way she wears her eyebrows
and those two tone eyes
those slate colored cheeks
and those marvelous teeth
and to all the girls of Jackson, Mississippi;
you know I need you want you miss you
love you.
When clouds are moving I think of you."

The Arcade

Dropping by after school with his fellow Hawks,
the Duke hunches over the juke playlist every day
then plays a little pinball;
before leaving, he takes a trip to the can
to the condom machine;
he comes out casual, letting the Hawks see him
putting the box in his pocket.
Later, sitting on the step of the back door in the alley
with the girl he takes out after supper,
a kiss that means let's get down to business,
while inside, late, when the place turns white
and loud against the night
and eight tables are going full blast
and all the sailors and marines,
delivery drivers and dock workers
and guys with Co-op or Mobil emblems on their chests
or caps
are milling around chalking cues,
working on English cue ball shots,
in the corner on table 7
money's riding a game of straight 8;
a buck marine says to his opponent
"your shot pajama pants"
and pajama pants, known as Kelso off the Constellation,
known as Porkbutt to his friends who seldom see him
since he spends his life on KP,
considers whether prison would be worth it
while the Hawks watch and wonder what war
made the scar on Porkbutt's left forearm
where he gouged out his ex-wife's tattooed name
like a bad spot on a good potato.

When Basketball Season Rolls Around

the men on the stoop around 3rd and Walnut
shake fists at the first ad for snow tires.
They tuck the *Kansas City Star*
inside their shirts.
Loose on tokay or muscatel
they hunch by for awhile,
till about mid-season
till about the all-star game
when a blizzard hits
and somebody charges up the station wagon,
cruises the snowbanks,
digging out those who don't measure up,
or those who read the article
at the bottom of 7A
about a guy sagging under a radiator
at Dollar Bill's Easy Autos,
drinking the anti-freeze;
about the time the interview appears
with the coach whose team's
clinched a play-off berth,
the men left at 3rd and Walnut
eye the ad in the next column
for patio furniture
or a Toro mower.

Why War Makes Me Think of Coca Cola

After four years as a prisoner of war
David Foster came home to find his family in tears.
All the relatives, all the friends, all the neighbors,
had David Foster over for dinner;
he ballooned into a fat man for starters.

His mother told close friends he was different now:
David talking in his sleep about birds
deceived by searchlights perking up
singing songs in dust covered branches;
David telling the reverand 'Thank God for toilet paper!';
David sitting on the curb
drinking cola and watching cars,
watching women, watching jet trails in the sky;
David calling people he never liked before
and going out for a beer;
David laughing in family arguments;
David watching earthworms divide;
David on the jungle gym, David on the swings,
on the merry-go-round, on the teeter totter;
David telling reverands 'Thank God for masturbation!';
David on the curb, sitting,
drinking colas, watching cars,
watching women, watching jet trails in the sky.

12 O'Clock White Sale

Because there's only apple pie at the Woolworth lunch
counter today,
or because she has done nothing to confess this week,
or just because,
she will tug her little white gloves
back on her little black hands,
will take her little two wheel shopping cart
and wait till DON'T WALK begins to blink,
then go one slow foot after the other,
black Sunday hat set back
on her black Sunday hair,
keeping the Country Squire Wagons,
Vista Cruisers with rear window seats
full of kids,
Grand Safaris and Gran Marquis
waiting,
will step finally up on the curb
with a halfsmile a halflook back
at housewives station wagoning by
who at this moment
in their own parts of the city
are putting scarves over their rolled up hair,
picking up the keys,
unsuspecting of this.

Sleeping Out

We camp in the thicket, my sons and I,
back far enough we can almost
not see the lights of our neighborhood;
we can almost believe we're in hostile territory
behind enemy lines.
I open up my backpacking stove,
knock the skillet on a rock to rid the rust.

"Don't give away our position soldier,"
my older son says. Yes sir,
Holding my old cane he found in the basement,
he aims into all the corners of the woods.
He sits just outside the circle of light
so a sniper cannot pick him off
in the same burst that would kill his father and brother.
Hash browns, freeze dried steak popple on the stove.
Our sentry says again, "That food's too loud."

"Guess we'll have to chance it," I say,
"or let it simmer all night."
The smell of grub finally reels him back,
I kid they can get him now in the same burst;
he eats and says it's time-out.
With chow in our bellies
I'm ready to knock off for the evening,
but the young one wants us to stay up all night.
"I'm getting in my bag. If you want to
you can stand guard over me if you like."

They stand guard, pretend to smoke,
argue over what the last password was
as only thirty, thirty-five, forty minutes go by,
like when this is lived out for real:

time gets oh so slow. An hour.
"Is it midnight yet?"
"No, about 8:30."

"You think we could trust those Charlies
not to raid us? So we could come to bed?"

"We can trust those Charlies."

Lying on this October ground,
even with an army blanket underneath,
pokes like the bottom of a troop truck.
A body on a tailgate got bounced around enough
it sometimes took the bluest bruises
on the way to the air strip
after the man inside had gone dead.

Dinner's given me gas:
like the mortars I thought
that didn't sound like anything else
until this,
until the popping of freeze dried steaks.
I see enough stars and loomy shapes to last me,
the not-quite-a-woman-yet faces coming from everywhere.
When we came into a village
we couldn't go two feet
without them running up
"good time good time"
or a burned-up boy poking around,
asking 'chock-let?'
In the sicktents, under the cots,
in everyone's hair:

'If soldier die I get chock-let?'
Dust so heavy you spit and it hangs in the air,
so hot it melts your chock-let.

Darkness moving across the sky
as if the stars were wiped away.
oh oh, rain. oh heavy rain.

"Come on, men let's go."
I get a hold of what I can.
My youngest is to full of sleep,
I pick him up, take him with me.

"Let's stay let's stay," he says.
"No."
"But it's hardly raining –
I wanna staay."
"No son. Let's get going,
let's go home now."

I charge up to the house in the sprinkle
while my other son, one shoe on,
fools through his shirt for the sleeve and says
"I don't understand,"
he does up one button
then hops to mess with his other shoe
and says again:
"I don't understand."

My Daughter Wants to Bicycle Through Europe

3 days and nights alone behind German lines in the
closing days,
3 days and nights without sleep.
I have gotten somewhere back I think somewhere near
our lines.
A returning German fighter plane sees me
but does not yet open up.
I am too tired to duck.
I am dark against the snow and have no chance.
I am less a target standing up.
He circles,
I stand and turn and watch and turn
as if I had the plane on a string,
as though it were my toy
and I was turning it.
He rolls his wings once,
fires a far off burst to let me know,
and flies on.

ALONG BAKER DRIVE

1. old 15, the insurance salesman

Sundays during halftime
he waves his son
to the end of the lawn,
wings passes too hot to handle:
most times a spiral,
sometimes a shake,
till a boy's hands tremble.

At the office he gets up
the weekly pot. Doodles
O's and X's on the back
of WHILE YOU WERE OUT notes;
balls up paper,
hits the trashbasket
9 times in 10;
takes lunch with visiting execs,
shakes hands rough.

2. the wedding song
of
clifton jones

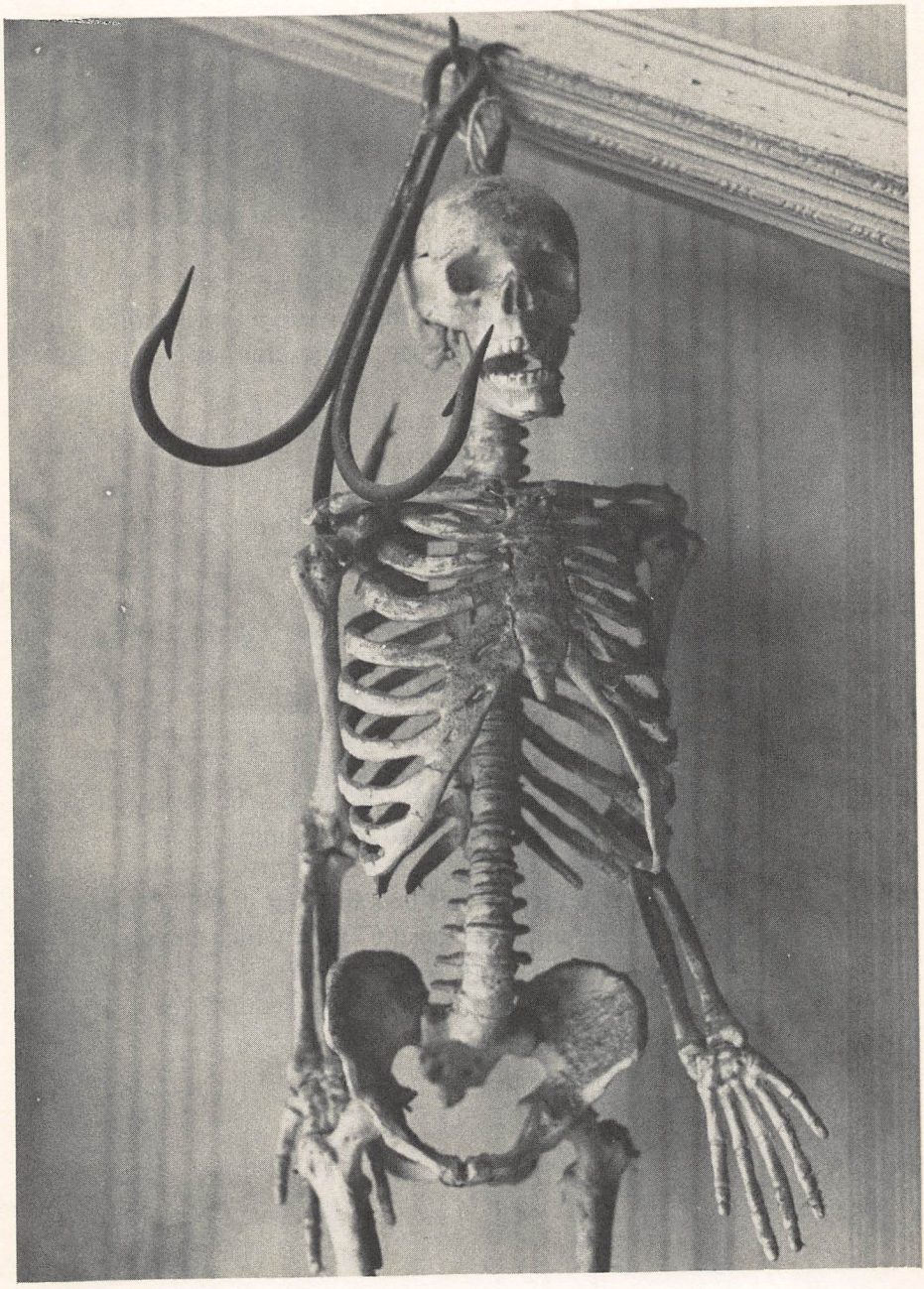
If people in the neighborhoods
where everybody eats on time
give us the stare
like the eyes of old lions,
and bad times are acting up
like a boy asking why to every answer,
and you're afraid I'll leave you
wet and shaking
alone to face the morning sun,
more sudden than a blizzard
in a paperweight
I'll kiss you in all the places
you were taught not to touch,
end up later with
your face all smoothed up next to mine.

When clouds are moving I think of you.
When candy wrappers come to crack on the fire
and young logs burn old before their time,
I think of you and me.
Some men are born the way we are,
some snakes are born with two heads,
some clovers have four leaves.

3. burning the bagworms

Spray poison attached to the garden hose
would get rid of bagworms quicker,
and not attract the attention of neighbors
who may not like the example for their children
of killing made personal:
neighbors who would not object if snails in a garden
were gathered, thrown in a sack and thrown in the trash,
but who correct and scold a boy
who sprinkles salt on snails in single fashion.

Now the boy had come out with long kitchen matches
to burn the bagworms one by one
hung all over the mimosa tree;
he keeps each match under each swollen sack
even after the snapping starts.
Worms on fire come writhing out,
rising from flame fast as worms can go
though whether for one last look at life,
or to see the other worms, or just to die,
the boy did not know.
The neighbors did not know
if he thought this occasion solemn,
or fun.



4. the rock band jamming up a storm

He don't wanna know the reason that he love you –
that's what the lead singer's got to say,
he saw you walkin' on down the line,
but he can't find the chords for the way the robin
looks at her eggs as silently as the blue jay
pecked at them;
no verses for the 12 year old girl
in Caruthersville, Missouri,
who bleeds on the bed in her sleep,
or for the snail becoming curious forever
in the drying cement of the sidewalk
in front of her house.
He sings you gotta pay the dues for blues,
you can only call a rose a rose
when you don't got B flat down right,
since you left him baby
those rolls of toilet paper last longer.
He don't wanna know the reason that he love you
or why his mother stares at the ceiling
from her bathwater,
or how his father knows he's looking
at constellations, but doesn't know which ones,
when he tells *his* story to the stars
or to the dried blood colored rusty rakes
drying on garage pegs,
or why the old man has a cigarette
and walks it off.

5. the lady and the snail

He has glistered in her greenhouse two weeks
since eeking under the door
the weekend she went to Palm Springs;
knows nothing of her tin can
or her recipe
from the article "Delicacies
in Your Flower Garden,"
knows nothing but the urge to flower;
friends urged her to La Paz and Acapulco and back
in the time he traveled one table;
during her coffee
he has reached the particular pot,
has started up the stem
but will never
make it
at the rate he has been given:
his pell-mell cannot match her stroll;
the rose stays whole,
a good chance for a ribbon.

6. living in nice neighborhoods

Each wisp of hair I comb from the dog
ends up in a nest.

Caught By Whim I Close the Window on a Wasp

Caught by whim I close the window on a wasp
leaving him between glass and screen,
sill crusted iridescent by bits of bodies
from blue and green bottle flies,
scraps of catch from other whims.
The wasp hovers, stings wood and windowpanes,
roams, stings and goes nowhere for hours.
Another kind of summer fun
for a boy bored with baseball,
till the wasp lies upside down,
shudders dried and shrunken
as if sucked from life by something inside,
as though starved and suffocated
among small dead-dry spiders, flyspecks and pie crumbs,
though everywhere was air.

I Have Seen Many Movies Where the Rich Commit Suicide

I have seen many movies
in which the rich commit suicide
by walking into the sea.
Women drive fast down narrow roads
but walk slowly toward the ocean waves when they go,
long gowns dragging in the sand.

Men strip down from tuxedos or uniforms,
leaving their medals behind,
before rushing into the wet.
A good chance for somebody to pick up good duds.
Often there's a big moon out.

I'd go naked if I had to go.
I'd run into a bus.
Stepping on all the cracks in 89th Street
I'd throw rocks at junkies in cold turkey,
and leave a note to tell the rich all they'd want to know
of frozen pipes and 6 A.M. el trains
that rattle plaster from the ceiling.
There's my Sting Ray,
see her glint?
Sure the wife cries:
women.

Shoes

When Linda McKenzie's husband died, she didn't save his old clothes. She didn't save his trinkets, or his power tools, or all the scraps of wood propped for many summers against the side of the garage. She kept his name and picture, but she didn't keep the accordion he bought and always talked of learning to play. She kept the microwave oven, but she didn't save the aprons saying 'Mom.' She didn't keep his club memberships. She didn't save his shoes. Her mother made a big to do over that. Linda's mother had saved the old man's workshoes for years, kept them under the bed for years after Linda's father died. Linda asked her mother about that. Her mother said the old man dropped his shoes under the bed every night. For years the shoes had lain there where they had lain every night for years and years. Her mother only said, now they lie there in the daytime too.

Julie Walker

At first not hip enough
to come to school stoned
like the head surfer
or the star halfback,
she'd gargle her father's whiskey,
all day pretend to be drunk
till driving home, a real drunk
hooked up with her in a head-on,
gave her a scar from cheek to chin
that boys must have felt
would look out of place at the prom.

Saturday nights she takes out her albums,
blackens the teeth of her favorite singer
thinks about her trip to Tijuana:
the peddlars coming at her from all sides
like fans, like autograph hounds,
like men at a fancy ball,
each one asking 'can it be my turn now?'

DUNROVIN ARMS

1. all of the shops sell yarn

So much rouge and cleavege
on the covers of movie magazines,
lifetime subscriptions at all the salons,
so much old hair being washed and set
dyed and sprayed, backcombed,
so much white and gray brushed across balding heads
as the ladies fall asleep during the massage
with Silver Spray Number Five,
magazines sagging to their stomachs.
They return home later in groups or twos past little shops
with crossword puzzle books in the windows,
glass swans and porcelain poodles,
return to the neighborhood where
if dinner is not ready at straight up 6 o'clock
fingers will be working at the curls
or knitting needles tapping
among long rows of rocking chairs on big verandahs,
neighborhoods where ambulences sound no sirens
and no one throws rocks at squirrels.

2. no shuffleboard

For a laugh over lemonade
Tom and Nell, Carl, Libby and Flo
ahem a lot, get situated in wicker.
No shuffleboard today thank you.
Over toast and jelly, honeybuns,
they talk about the quiet men they waited for once,
of love made quick and quiet near the Victrola,
of a promise made once under paw paws
and a Wisconsin moon slow as this waiter
"Goddamit I'm seventy-two years old
and I've worked hard for my money
so how about some service at this table?"

Praise the Lord. Pass the jam.
No shuffleboard today thank you.

3. an old man, Jesus, ginger cookies

"The trouble with Jesus: you can't tell folks
that He talks back, that He gets uppity,
that He won't let you forget what He knows.
Call for time or weather, He taps the line.
At ball games, in the toilet, suddenly
'I know where you hide the ginger cookies.'
At all the Spring Parties doormen whisper
'It's known where he hides the ginger cookies.'
Speaking in 3/4 time during waltzes
Jesus, in the form of Mrs Eisele,
'I know where you hide the ginger cookies.' "

4. the day Stella Knowlsen died

While Eleanor Gillison talked to her about roses
and Bob Willson laughed "Ha you know what aphids eat"
and everybody rocked
and Bob Willson laughed "Ha I guess Eleanor ha ha bored
her to death,"
Stella nodded slowly to a stop.
Ha over cigars during uproars
the day Stella Knowlsen died on the frontporch.
Everyone shouting best they could.
Everyone out of breath.
Everyone saying "and nobody sits in her rocker – ever,"
and Willson: "Life's the dying of the person like flame's the
burning of the match,"
and Eleanor saying "I touched her and she was gone"
then off in the bathroom
washing her hands as often
as Willson lighting his lighter,
looking at it
too many times

5. if you had been to madrid

"When I was in Madrid poets and painters from everywhere
talking transcendence and metaphysics
during their green or blue periods.
Madrid: drowsy sidewalk restaurants, brown cerveza,
days good enough to be postcards.
And the men.
From all countries men would come.
I lunched with Hemingway.
I came to know American men
are no worse than others.
Married and living here
I wouldn't have known that of American men,
not if there were chairs and tables to dust,
or tomatoes to slice, grocery stores to be gone to,
or quarters to trade for teeth under pillows,
not in a marriage made up of Sunday papers and
morning coffee, the Macy's Santa Claus, baby baths,
and matinees and laundrymen,
and potato plants in the kitchen.
Oh to see the sun come calling tomorrow in Madrid
for the toreadors who tonight in their rooms
must be entertaining red rose ladies
with tequila or fine wine.
Oh the matadors splendid between the blue satin sheets
of their brave beds.

Backcountry House

Because the old barn and two room farmhouse
set back from the backwoods road a good piece
and looked like it would fall anyway, the husband said so
and pushed at a porch post to prove it,
the couple let themselves through a boarded window
when the door wouldn't budge.

"Here's what's doing that. Some old dirt farmer
must have saved half a life for this full chest."

"It was probably the woman's," the wife said.
"A man wouldn't have such a thing. *You* wouldn't.
It was hers, and her mother's before that."

The husband tried to move it with his foot,
keeping one hand on the camera around his neck.

"Maybe it's not a man's, but it's a man's work
to move that thing against the door. Two men's."

"Let's see if you're man enough to open it up,
phew, do you think they left because of dust?"

He pried and worked his fingers under,
shaking the old latch into sounds the wind
gets when it works on the roof, all in thatch.
Against the steady yank on the trunk
the walls seemed to sway, the wood didn't groan
but the nails did, and the earth smelled.

"Maybe you should stop, maybe this time
we're not meant to look. Do you think?"

He stopped to look at her and get his breath.
He sat on the edge, wiped his hands of smudge.

"Do you see that pop top from a can?
There's another there. Someone's been here,
someone's been in here and given up.
Let's not be like those before.
We'll get ourselves a look."

He took a board, banged on the lock
as if wood had never heard of metal;
until the point of giving up, the latch
seemed the better for it, rid of the rust,
then it just stopped latching, and was done.

"Rocks? You did all that for plain old rocks.
I'd laugh, but to laugh I'd have to breathe
with my mouth open in here, and I won't."

He closed the lid and they poked around the rooms,
taking pictures of broken, weathered chair legs
more like war clubs a man would raise
than anything that would hold a man up.

Going out, they put the window boards back.
When he stopped and leaned against a porch post
and waited for her to take his picture
part of the roof almost gave way.

Sadie

white folks called her Sadie.
she tended house and fixed food
till I was born.
seeing me the missus threw her out
'make her a field nigger – ride her hard.'
growing up I saw Sadie mostly by moonlight
by day only on Sunday
when she tried to set her hands right
pick the grit out from the cuts.
black flies sucking blood.
she marched off every morning
and worked in dust
till her hands turned knobby
her shoulders gnarled and dropped
till she had only shins for legs.
she limped off every morning
and hacked till dusk
till the wagon came round in black
head man bringing food
saying she'd broke.
for a year or so after
the hands sang a song of Sadie.
of Sadie in the canebreak
Sadie in the furrows.
in the blood hot sun.
in the back of the stables.
in the little shacks on Sunday night.
a song of Sadie in the toolshed
Sadie in the cane.

The River I Have Fished in All My Life

The river I've fished in all my life
takes its name from an Indian word
I've never known the meaning of.
I've seen Nebraska and Iowa's best years
flow by and foul new lures, tug a good sinker,
linger in slow eddies and move off
toward Arkansas, Mississippi.
I've never known a man around here
to say he loves the land.
I've never known a man around here
to sell out and move off, and then come back.
Mostly we've been here year in year out,
here where folks teeth go bad soon,
where trains that run alongside our land
have the shades pulled down in the diners, in the sleepers,
and colored porters agree there's not much to look at,
where people look down on us from jets
and think it's all a whole lot of nothing
here where with the coming of storm
the water in the well stops reflecting
and tractors bear loads of hay two horses high
to barns where wind is wanting to whirl in the dark corners,
where wind has even gotten into the horse trough.

Perspective

His name was never Noah
and we never called him that
though TV people said we did.
After awhile Crawford's started giving him
a cut rate on lumber,
and it did rain for close on to a week once.
We understood there to be radical Baptists
shook up over the deal
driving in from outstate
to put a stop to it all,
but they must of come around and decided
like us: no big thing, no big deal.

But what I'm talking about –
one kook in a small town is all it takes.
Every once in awhile you hear about
some big-city cat-woman in an apartment house
dying and when the cops find her:
everywhere cats cats.
Enough cats it makes the news.
But you expect that in the city.

You get a bunch of fools together in a city
and they say 'Hail Satan, shake it up Lucifer'
and dance around naked or something
with their sweaty hot bodies
and nobody cares.
But get a couple of weirdos in a town
to cut off the balls of a few bulls
and the magazines go wild.
Say that somebody in New York City
fucks a lit jack-o-lantern through the nose:
no big deal.

But let that break out in Plainsville, Kansas,
or Norfolk, Nebraska,
or Muncie, Indiana,
and you've got trouble.

People start to sit back and think
'*Something's* going on in this country.'

Chuck Hemble's Henhouse

Chuck leaves the lights on,
fumbles in the coop,
decides who's a producer
and who's soup.
All the hens cry
chuck chuck

Drought Comes to Jackson County

1

In the barn rafters
bees fight off wasps
the only way they can.
The bees stinging
and the bees stung
fall on the back
of the rearing mule
whose stall's invaded
by a family of mice.
He makes mice into mouse.

2

This lemonade puckers the face.
Or sits till the cubes melt.
After early supper
I'm in the browning rows,
a hawk narrows his circle in silence.
He knows nothing's up
but there's nothing for a hawk to do:
watch me pour the last lemonade
over the corn,
peck at old mouse bones.

3

A sparrow jiggles a spider web with his bill
then watchingly waits;
on the porch an ant takes inventory,

then flees without a crumb
to spread the news.
My family stared at the sky
before jet trails appeared there.
Bagworms will rule the world.

It is autumn, evening,
I think only of my parents
who would have made the earth say corn
instead of grass,
if the seed had made its point,
if the land had listened.

Mark Twain in Hannibal

He could poke fun at Hannibal,
the Mark Twain Burger at Huck Finn's Hideaway Cafe,
but if he came back from the dead
he'd be at the Standard Station
looking over the cold cans of Frosty Top root beer,
then finding a stoop to sit sloop shouldered on
and listen to gabby travelers gassing up
crabbing about traffic on 36 highway,
ticked off about all the time lost,
rednecked over prices at John Pershing's Laclede, Missouri,
or Abe Lincoln's Springfield.

I Write A Love Letter With A Quill Pen, in the Other Room My Mother Watches a Movie on the Nazi Holocaust

As I fashion out of what I claim burns in my heart,
from the living room off the TV come screams:
millions of screams millions are watching;
screams from people burned or shot,
shoveled into gas ovens
while we watch and sometimes say,
during commercials for better breath and peace of mind,
"how could people *do* such things?
how could people try?"

I sit and write this note with a quill pen
while millions, and millions, watch the holocaust,
while under the bedroom door comes the clanging sound
and locking of heavy oven doors.

This note is to help you out of bed
when the morning is cold
and the day's work will be hard
and you feel nobody cares, and you're right;

for the truck driver barreling just now
late into Wichita;
for the 12 year old girl in Caruthersville, Missouri,
who bleeds on the bed in her sleep;
for the boys graduating from high school
in McPherson, Kansas, willing to go to work
in the fiberglass plant;
for their English teachers who gather
in the lunch room or after school to talk;

for the men working forklifts;
for the men fuming in foundries at Ford
Chrysler and General Motors;
for the women typing, nursing, cooking,
teaching, standing on assembly lines,
standing on street corners,
standing behind counters in department stores;

for the woman who has just now
found a lump in her breast;
for the boy with bad teeth
who keeps to himself;

for all the people who visit
Andersonville, Gettysburg and Alcatraz;
for the old man saving money
for a trip to Isreal, and Auschwitz.

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FRANK HIGGINS has worked as a Poet-in-the-Schools for the Missouri Arts Council and Kansas Arts Commission. His play *There Came Forth From Darkness* has been performed in Kansas City. Higgins published a previous book of poems (BkMk) titled *hello hello*. A forthcoming book of haiku will appear later this year, *Headed Where Used Up Electricity Goes.*

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